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SUBJECT: BJP THE BIG WINNER IN KARNATAKA'S BY-ELECTIONS

REF: CHENNAI 413

11. (SBU) Summary: The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won five of the eight Karnataka legislative assembly seats contested in by-elections on December 27. The victory gives the BJP an absolute majority of 115 seats in Karnataka's 224-seat legislative assembly, the first time the BJP has accomplished this feat in South India. The regional Janata Dal-Secular (JDS) party won at least two seats, and its candidate is leading in a third constituency where counting continues. The Congress Party failed to win any of the eight contested seats. The BJP's victory provides helpful momentum for the party in the run-up to national elections, due before May 2009. End summary.

12. (U) The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as expected, did well in the December 27 state legislative assembly by-elections held in eight of Karnataka's constituencies (reftel), winning at least five, according to results announced on December 30. The regional Janata Dal-Secular (JDS) party won at least two seats, and its candidate is leading in a third constituency where votes are still being tallied. The Congress Party failed to win a single seat.

13. (U) The by-elections give the BJP 115 seats in the 224-seat legislative assembly, the first time that the BJP has commanded a majority of seats in a state legislature in South India. The BJP, somewhat tenuously in power in Karnataka since the May elections thanks to the support of several independents, now looks set to cement its grip on the state for the remainder of its five-year term.

14. (SBU) Karnataka's Chief Electoral Officer, M. N. Vidyashankar, reportedly told the press that election officials had seized some INR 3.2 million (USD 66,300) in cash "meant for distribution among voters" in violation of election rules. He also reportedly told the press that officials had seized INR 12 million (USD 248,000) in liquor meant for the same purpose. One of Vidyashankar's deputies confirmed for us the accuracy of these reports, emphasizing that the seizures had come from all parties and were initiated by the Election Commission's pressure on police detachments to enforce the rules. (Comment: Our back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that the seized liquor amounts to more than 38,000 750-ml bottles of a relatively highbrow spirit like "Royal Stag Whisky," which could supply every man, woman, and child in the eight by-election constituencies with 120 ml, or about four ounces. The seized spirits were likely a cheaper variety, suggesting that this is an under-estimation of the actual amount of liquor seized. End comment.)

Comment

15. (SBU) By anyone's reckoning, the BJP did well in the by-elections. Since it has held the reins of power in the state since the May legislative assembly elections, it is likely to cast these wins as an endorsement of its rule. The BJP is now firmly in control in Karnataka, and its victories in the by-elections should provide useful momentum in the run-up to national elections due before May.

